

When holiness and tolerance collide

Revelation 2:18-29

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The city was called Thyatira. It was on a major trade route in Asia Minor, which is now the modern country of Turkey. It stood between the cities of Pergamum and Sardis, where the modern city of Akhisar is now located.

While having various temples to pagan gods it was not known as a center for Greek or Roman Emperor worship. Because of this there was not direct persecution related to religious worship. This would have been very different from the Christians in Smyrna, who were being persecuted because they refused to burn incense to the emperor and refused to proclaim, "Caesar is Lord!" In Thyatira Satan sought to use a different strategy, a more passive approach, to destroy the unsuspecting church.

Thyatira was famous for its purple dye. The Madder root was readily available around Thyatira. For centuries it had been used to dye cotton, silk, wool, leather and other textiles. It was also used with coloring pottery. It was a purple dye that mimicked the extremely rare and expensive purple dye that in the past had only been worn by royalty. Lydia, the seller of purple, in Acts 16:14, came from Thyatira.

Because of the Madder root and its purple dye, Thyatira had become a great exporter of purple cloth. Through the years this had attracted many master dyers to the city. Eventually many guilds had been started to support the many trades and artisans. They included wool-workers, potters, leather workers, bronze-workers, as well as many others. These guilds were a major part of the strong economy in Thyatira. If one wanted to do well economically in Thyatira, they needed to be connected to a guild. Here was the problem.

Many of the guild social events would include meals that were at times held in temples of pagan gods, and even if not, they usually began and ended with a sacrifice to the gods. Often times the meat that was served had been sacrificed to pagan gods, and the eating of the meal was viewed as an extension of this act of worship. To make things worse, these social events often included drunkenness and even different forms of immorality.

To attend was to condone, and to participate was to show that your loyalties did not lie with Christ. It probably started innocently enough with business contacts, but step by step, some in the church were being led to loosen their morals, choosing to fit in more with the world around them for the sake of financial gain and social prominence.

It probably was much like the old story of the frog in the kettle. At first the frog was relaxed in the water. Unknowingly, the temperature was being raised one degree at a time. The change was so slow that he grew accustomed to the temperature, and in the end, he was cooked and never even realized it. That is what was happening to the church in Thyatira. The church was softening its commitment to holiness and was growing more comfortable with the ways of the world.

¹⁸ And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: "The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first."

In contrast to Revelation chapter one, Christ was not coming to them as the Son of Man, who relates to the humanness of man. Christ was now coming as the Son of God, who would speak to them from a more divine perspective. In power, holiness, warning and judgment, Christ was now coming to them with ***"eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze."***

At times churches cling to certain characteristics of Christ, while neglecting others. Some focus on faith, others grace, others joy, while neglecting the more sobering characteristics of Christ, such as his call to repentance, suffering or sanctification. This church seems to have focused on the love of Christ, while neglecting Christ's holiness and promise to judge sin. It set the stage for this problem in the church.

Christ knew of the church of Thyatira and its good works, its love, its faith, its service, its patient endurance, and its recent works that seemed to have been getting better and better. To many it probably seemed to be a great church to be a part of, but Christ had something against them.

" ²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols."

It is difficult enough when the church is having to war against the world around it, but now the danger had come inside the church, and the church in Thyatira was tolerating it.

There was a woman in the church. She is referred to as Jezebel, but that is likely not her real name. Jezebel was a wicked queen who is talked about in 1 Kings. Jezebel was from a foreign country. She married Ahab, the king of Israel. She brought with her her pagan gods and led King Ahab and Israel to walk in wickedness and idolatry against God. Jezebel had many of the prophets of the Lord killed (1 Kings 18:13), and left behind a reputation for "harlotry and sorceries" (2 Kings 9:22).

When one thinks of wickedness in the Old Testament, Jezebel is one of the names that stands out above the rest. This is quite an indictment against this woman when Jesus refers to her as Jezebel.

This woman in the church of Thyatira was a self-appointed prophetess. Prophets and prophetesses were spokespeople of God. They were to be God appointed, and at times recognized by the church, but this phrase “calls herself a prophetess” communicates that she had taken upon herself a position of authority that was not recognized by God and had not been confirmed by the church.

We must be careful of this. A call to serve God is not meant to take place in a vacuum. It should take place within the life of the church. One of the best examples I have seen of this was several years ago when I went on a mission trip to Cuba. I remember talking with a missionary and several of the Cuban pastors, hearing how they went about discerning who is called to be a pastor. Those in the church would notice pastoral characteristics in a person in the church. In his gifting and character. They would then approach him and communicate that they sensed God may be calling him to be a pastor. If he was open to his possible calling to be a pastor, he would be assigned to a small settlement of 10-15 houses outside of their town. He would evangelize and minister to the people there. After a year of ministry, they would evaluate what God was doing. If his call to ministry was confirmed by the fruit of his ministry, then they would ask if he would be willing to attend seminary. They would then help him attend seminary and become a pastor.

This was not Jezebel’s way. She had appointed herself to lead God’s people and now she was leading them away from Him. This woman, referred to as Jezebel, was “teaching and seducing” people of the church “to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.” Given their context, amidst the guilds, it is possible that she was convincing people of the church that participating in idol worship, drunkenness and immorality was okay because it was part of normal work expectations amidst the guilds there in Thyatira. We don’t know the exact arguments that she was using, but somehow she was ushering the people of God away from holiness and into grave sin, and the church was tolerating it.

We have to be careful with the word “tolerance”, because at times it moves us in the right direction, and at others it moves us in the wrong direction.

It is true that we need to be more culturally tolerant. As the world becomes more diverse and multi-cultural this will continue to be the need. Here in Madrid we experience the cultures of the world at church, at school, in our neighborhoods, and even in our own families. We need to be open to cultural ideas such as different types of foods, different types of greetings, different norms in family life, and different ways of thinking. Without this, we see someone’s actions or hear someone’s words and, from our limited understanding, we start to judge wrongly when we do not understand what is happening.

Cultural tolerance has its benefits, but there is a difference between cultural tolerance and moral tolerance.

Moral tolerance is completely different. If something is moral, that means it has a right and wrong dynamic before God. Choosing whether to wear black or brown shoes does not have a right or wrong dynamic. There isn’t a holy option and a sinful option. They are just shoes. Choosing whether or not to commit adultery does have a right and wrong option. Choosing whether to take the metro to Avenida de America or to Arturo Soria to come to church does not have a right or wrong dynamic to it, but choosing whether or not to gossip or lose your temper about something selfish does. We all were created by God

and are under His authority. There are laws of God for which all mankind are responsible. We are called to care for those in need. We are called to value life. We are to love others. We are instructed not to murder, to steal, or to covet. These are the standards that are the same regardless of what culture we have come from. None of us are beyond the authority of the standards of God. As Romans 2:14-15 says, these are the laws that God has written on every person's heart.

We are in a time in history much like theirs, where for the sake of "tolerance" we are being told to conform to the world around us. 2 Timothy 4:3-4 warns us about these days: ***"For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."***

This is very likely what was happening in the life of the church in Thyatira. The only reason that Jezebel had any influence was because there were people in the church who were open to her ideas. There must have been people in the church who were willing to set aside the standards of God for their own worldly benefit. They followed her teaching because it was what they wanted to hear.

We see here a dangerous trend. It threatens us as well. It is the separation of the secular and the spiritual. I understand what people are trying to say when they are using those terms. Secular is defined as something that is not connected to spiritual or religious matters, but for a Christian that distinction does not truly exist. When we put our faith in Christ He took complete ownership of it all. He has all authority over our prayer life, our work life, our family life, our financial life, and every other part of our lives. Our emotions are His. Our words are His. Our thoughts are His. Our actions are His. For a Christian every moment is to be an expression of our worship of Christ.

In Thyatira they were trying to separate their lives into spiritual and secular so they could do what their selfish hearts desired, and still claim to be followers of Christ, but that is not the way of Christ.

Let us take a moment to search our own hearts. Even though none of us are perfect, are we striving to live a consistent Christian life all the time, or are we two different people depending on where we are and who we are with? If so, today, may Christ convict us and turn us back towards home.

"²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. ²² Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, ²³ and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works."

In these next verses we see that a gracious Messiah had given this woman time to repent, but she had refused. God will not be mocked. When grace is refused, the only other option is judgment. Here we find extreme judgment. We do not know for sure if it was literal or figurative, but either way it was this Christ, the One with eyes flaming like fire, who was bringing complete judgment on this woman and all who continued to follow her wickedness.

In this display of wrath and judgment, the churches would see that Christ searches hearts and minds and gives to each according to their works. They should not mistake His grace for weakness. He was good, but was also to be feared. Unrepentant sin against an infinitely holy God has terrible consequences.

Christ then turned His attention back to the rest of the church.

“²⁴ But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. ²⁵ Only hold fast what you have until I come. ²⁶ The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, . . .”

Christ gave them no other assignment. For those who had not given in to Jezebel’s teaching, Jesus instructed them to hold on to what they had in the faith until Christ comes. Here we see three commands that only Christ can accomplish in us. In the midst of our holding fast, He is the one who is really holding on to us. It is like the mother walking with the young child who is learning to walk. The child holds on to the hand of the mother, but the mother is really doing the “holding”. Christ has a forever hold on His children. As we read in John 10:28, ***“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”*** Christ is their confidence.

Christ then calls them to overcome, but overcoming is also only possible because Christ, the true Overcomer, dwells within them. There will be days that this will seem impossible in our own lives, but our confidence that he who overcame even death is in us and we are in Him. Christ is our confidence.

They are then instructed to keep His works to the end. Keeping His works to the end is an overflow of what Christ is doing in our lives. Christ is the one who ***“works in us to will and to act according to His purpose”*** (Philippians 2:13). We can think back to the parable of the Prodigal Son. Because of sinful choices, the son found himself living in a foreign country in utter poverty. In the midst of his misery he was still the son of his father, but he had no access to the benefits of being the son of his father. To receive the full provision and blessings of the father’s house, the son had to be reconciled to the father.

That may be where many of us are today. We find ourselves trying to live for Christ and the world at the same time, and that is not possible. In the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:24, ***“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”*** Come home. Abide with Him. Dwell with Him. In this He will give us everything that we need to have a fully devoted heart. As we rest in Him, He will bring us to the point where we love what He loves, and what breaks His heart will break ours.

As we read in 2 Chronicles 6:19, ***“For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.”***

“. . . to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. ²⁸ And I will give him the morning star. ²⁹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Christ then encourages those faithful followers in Thyatira, reminding them how the story ends.

Verses 26 and 27 are quoted from Psalms 2:8-9, *“Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”* For the Jews this was seen as a Messianic description of a conquering Messiah who would wage war against the nations. In some ways this might be true if one is thinking about Christ’s final return. In other ways this “making the nations your heritage” can also refer to the idea from Revelation 7:9-10 that says, *“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”*

Christ was calling out to the church of Thyatira. Many in the church had turned to the ways of the world and Christ was coming with judgment to purify His church, but to the rest, if they would hold on to Christ, they would rule with Him for eternity.

Christ then concluded, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* Do we have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying?

Let us conclude with these verses from 1 John 2:15-17. *“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”*

Discussion questions:

- 1) What from this sermon was most interesting to you? Why?
- 2) In your own words, how would you describe what was happening in the church of Thyatira?
- 3) In your opinion, which do you think weakens the church more, a persecution of physical danger or a gradual persecution that draws us to seek the things of the world? (Frog in the kettle.)
- 4) At times we tend to focus only on the characteristics of Christ that we like the most. What characteristics do you tend to focus on and what other characteristics might you need to learn to appreciate more?
- 5) What sins do you think Christians often overlook? Why do you think we tolerate these sins more than others?
- 6) How does a person draw near to Christ and re-align her heart with Christ’s view of sin and holiness?
- 7) What do you think God wants you to remember from this sermon?
- 8) What do you think God wants you to do about that?
- 9) How can we pray for you?